DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 000 RC 022 937

AUTHOR	Walker, Sherry Freeland, Ed.
TITLE	The Rural Bellwether.
INSTITUTION	Education Commission of the States, Denver, CO.
ISSN	ISSN-0736-7511
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	17p.; Theme Issue. Published three times a year.
AVAILABLE FROM	Education Commission of the States, 707 17th St., Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427 (annual subscription $20). Tel: 303-299-3600. For full text: http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/24/10/2410.htm.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	State Education Leader; v19 n1 Win 2001
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Distance Education; Educational Cooperation; Elementary Secondary Education; Geographic Isolation; Preschool Education; *Rural Education; *Rural Schools; School Readiness; Service Learning; Special Education; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	Iowa; Maine; Nevada; North Dakota

ABSTRACT

This theme issue of "State Education Leader" contains eight articles on rural education. "The Rural Bellwether" (Kathy Christie) discusses declining enrollment in rural schools, rural problems with teacher shortages and special education funding, issues related to school size and school district size, and distance learning initiatives. "Iowa Links Education and Economy" (Greg Nichols) describes a proposal before the Iowa Legislature to improve teacher quality through pay raises, incentives, and continuing education, and, thereby, boost student achievement and contribute to a better educated workforce. "Collaboration in Nevada's Rural and Urban Schools" (Robert C. McCord) examines rural-urban collaborative projects concerned with teacher training and technology use. "Maine School Embraces Service-Learning" (Trisha L. Smith) describes a student-initiated middle school project involving cooperation between the school and a paper company and development of forestry education on company land. "Distance Education Overcomes Rural Isolation" (Suzanne Weiss) looks at examples of distance education innovations in rural Colorado, Arizona, and West Virginia. "Community Colleges: Key to Rural Success" (J. Parker Chesson, Jr.) discusses the role of community colleges in rural economic development and increased access to education. "Special Education: Tough Issue for Rural and Remote Areas" (Lynne Chalmers) describes a North Dakota program to increase the supply of rural special education teachers. "Early Learning: Child Care in Rural America" discusses child care conditions in rural America and efforts to link child care with preschool services. Rural education resources and statistics are listed. (SV)

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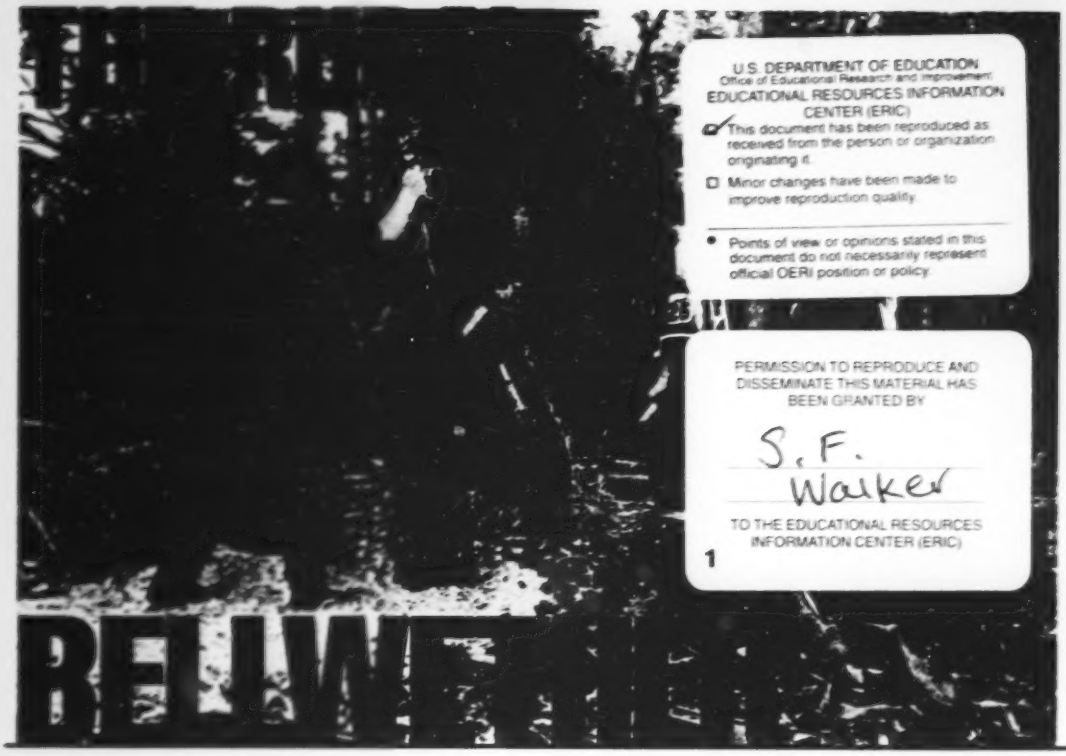
STATE EDUCATION

EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

VOLUME 19 NUMBER 1 WINTER 2001



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Rural Education: Beyond the Basics

by Kathy Christie

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Schools in rural America face an array of problems every bit as daunting and intractable as those confronting schools in urban communities. In rural communities, graduating students who see no future locally leave town, and a snowball effect begins. These young people are no longer there to start families, to send their children to school, to buy toothpaste from the local druggist or houses from the local realtor. A "brain drain" begins that leaves fewer high-quality workers to attract high-quality jobs. Fewer high-quality jobs means even fewer opportunities for the next generation of students, who will find themselves forced by economic necessity to leave the community.

In fact, in 22 states, more than half of all rural schools lost students between the 1994-95 and 1997-98 school years, according to the newsletter *Rural Policy Matters*. Those states with the highest percentages of enrollment loss were Louisiana, Idaho, North Dakota, West Virginia and Wyoming. States with large rural populations have begun to face these and other problems of rural schooling directly.

The State Role

In Iowa, 262 of 374 school districts (70%) experienced enrollment declines between 1999 and 2000, and the percentage decline has been largest in districts enrolling fewer than 1,000 students. No wonder Iowa Governor Thomas Vilsack says his priority is to offer Iowans new opportunities, including better schools, a preventive health-care system, a cleaner envi-

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ronment, a rejuvenated economy, safer communities and a more accountable state government. Vilsack has said that if Iowa doesn't grow during the next 10 years, businesses won't have the personnel they need to prosper. (See page 4 for related story.)

Meanwhile, legislators in Nebraska passed the Education and Career Preparation Act, which acknowledges that "technology is changing the educational and training needs of employees." Indeed, state leaders believe that education and career preparation have become critical for the state because students must possess the academic, communication and technological skills they need for employment and lifelong learning.

Attracting Personnel to Rural Schools

Rural communities face special problems in attracting staff members for their schools. For example, a community looking for a teacher might not have a job suitable for the teacher's spouse, and newly hired teachers accustomed to the convenience of multiple movie theaters and major malls sometimes find it hard to adjust to the extremely limited choices of a rural community. While the quiet, the lack of traffic, the low crime rate and the beautiful sunsets are clear attractions, staff members new to rural communities must often deal with loneliness, wind, cold or lack of suitable housing.

Many states are exploring ways to help deal with shortfalls in teacher recruitment. For example, Rhode Island has extended to 90 days in a school year the period of time that retired teachers may act as substitutes. Oklahoma passed a law allowing substitute teachers whose certificates have lapsed or who have bachelor's degrees to teach up to 100 days a year. And Tennessee allows retired teachers to resume teaching without loss of benefits under certain conditions.

Kentucky passed H.B. 519, which (1) defines areas of critical shortage in particular subject matters, at specific grade levels or in geographic locations; (2) implements the hiring of teachers in areas of critical shortage; (3) provides that a retired teacher may return to work in an area of critical shortage without loss of retirement benefits; and (4) permits school districts to hire retired teachers as full-time employees. Nebraska passed a law last spring that authorizes the Nebraska Volunteer Services Commission to apply for funding from the Corporation for National Service. The funding will be used to provide incentives to college graduates to establish their teaching careers in Nebraska and to encourage experienced Nebraska teachers to pursue graduate degrees.

Mississippi extended the Mississippi Employer-Assisted Housing Teacher Program, which provides interest-free loans to licensed teachers in areas of critical shortage. A new law in Georgia gives schools and school systems the right to advance on the salary schedule those teachers willing to teach in such areas of shortage as mathematics, science, special education or foreign language. Implementation of the law depends on funding from the general assembly.

Special Education Funding

Many rural states and communities struggle with the costs of providing services to students with disabilities. Nebraska set up a Hardship Fund to allow districts in financial distress to borrow to offset such costs such as an unusual number of special education students. New Hampshire provides double weighting in its finance formula for each full-time student enrolled in a special education program. [Although] the formula does not take into account the type of special needs each student may have.

The Size of Schools and Districts

The debate over the most efficient size of school districts continues. Over the past 40 years, states have greatly reduced the numbers of districts through a process known as consolidation. Because combining school districts is such a contentious community issue, legislators are reluctant to broach the topic. In South Dakota, for example, the *Rapid City Journal* recently reported that legislators this year will discuss eliminating the 20% small-school bonus that has allowed many small districts to survive. If this happens, many districts would need to consolidate or die. Predicted Representative Gordon Pederson, "You're turning tigers loose out of the cage. You'll have blood all over the hallways."

The Iowa legislature approved an incentive program in 1993 that encourages rural districts to share administrators, classes and even particular levels of schooling. The Iowa school finance formula has a mechanism designed to cushion the impact of enrollment declines over a number of years.

A Minnesota measure requires all school boards to submit a cooperation and coordination plan to the state board for review. The law includes provisions concerning both voter approval of proposals to combine districts and the treatment of financial obligations.

In Rhode Island, a commission appointed by the governor concluded in 1992 that there would be no savings realized from merging its 37 districts into just six. Savings could be gained only from closing schools or increasing class sizes, and neither was a palatable option.

A broad-based coalition of leading rural, farm and education activists in Nebraska has formed the Nebraska Alliance for Rural Education. The alliance's 1999 report, *Small Schools, Big Results*, contends that the proportion of Nebraska students who graduate from high school averages 97% in districts with less than 100 high school students, while the statewide average is 85%.

The report also claims that annual cost differences between the smallest schools and those that are most efficient to run are cut in half when measured as cost per graduate rather than as the traditional cost per pupil. Nebraska schools with fewer than 70 high school students, the report says, average only 25% higher cost per graduate than those with 600-999 students, while they average a 50% higher cost per pupil. In addition, the alliance contends that any higher costs associated with small schools virtually disappear when the substantial costs of nongraduates and the positive societal impact of college-educated citizens are considered.

Improving Access

A number of states have moved to help their rural school districts by means of the Internet. West Virginia established the West Virginia Virtual School to offer Internet courses to students who cannot get comparable courses at their local schools. Oklahoma passed a similar law creating the Virtual Internet School in Oklahoma Network. In Arkansas, the general assembly created the Interagency Distance Learning Review Commission and now requires coordination of all aspects of distance-learning activities.

Rural Perspective, Rural Needs

Following the history-making events of the Presidential election of 2000, one cannot help but be more aware of those states that, despite sparse populations, still retain strong voices through the electoral college. So it is with the rural voices within states and among states. The voices may be fewer and less densely distributed, but they are no less powerful. And what happens in rural communities might be the bellwether for the health of the nation. The problems of declining enrollment in the Dakotas and Iowa are problems of all Americans.

Christie is ECS vice president for information management and the Clearinghouse.

"[T]he proportion of Nebraska students who graduate from high school averages 97% in districts with less than 100 high school students, while the statewide average is 85%."

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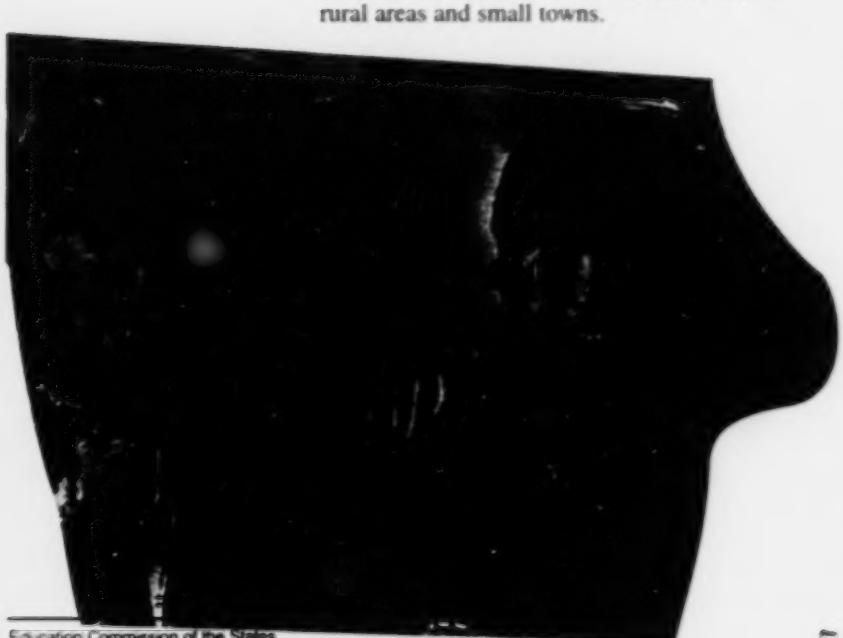
IOWA LINKS EDUCATION AND ECONOMY

by Greg Nichols

After being hit hard by the farm crisis of the 1980s, rural Iowa is struggling to move ahead.

In their first two years in office, Governor Tom Vilsack and Lieutenant Governor Sally J. Pederson have taken steps to educate Iowans about the challenges facing the state, create more opportunities and lay the groundwork for future changes.

This push for dramatic change is strongest as Iowans look at the link between a top-quality education for all children and the state's ability to move to the new economy. It is clear the state's future cannot depend on an economy built on low commodity prices and low-tech jobs, a path that led to sagging family incomes and stagnant population growth, especially in rural areas and small towns.



New Economy

As Vilsack said earlier this year in his Condition-of-the-State address, the new economy in Iowa "uses genetic codes, computer chips and other science and technology marvels to create new frontiers" and "relies on well-educated and productive workers, is energized by dynamic, global markets, rewards innovation and creativity, and is driven by rapidly growing, technologically connected small businesses. Such a new economy will lead to higher incomes for working Iowans and their families and a better quality of life for all Iowans."

Because of this need for a well-educated workforce, the major initiative to be addressed by the current 2001 session of the Iowa Legislature is a proposal to improve teacher quality and student achievement. The governor's office, key legislators from both parties and the Department of Education are working on a proposal that will change how the state pays and supports teachers, and how it strengthens the focus on student achievement.

This proposal is expected to feature four key elements:

- Base pay levels that enable Iowa to be strategically positioned to attract and retain education talent
- Variable pay that provides additional compensation if student performance improves significantly
- An induction program with mentors that will support new teachers
- Continuing education that will directly support better teaching practices.

Nichols is the legislative affairs coordinator for the governor of Iowa.

COLLABORATION IN NEVADA'S RURAL AND URBAN SCHOOLS

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by Robert C. McCord

Too many people's surprise, Nevada is the most urban state in the Union! The notion that Nevada has the highest percentage of its K-12 students attending schools in urban settings stands in stark contrast to the popular image of a sparsely populated largely desert wasteland punctuated by neon.

The fact is that Nevada's 17 county school districts represent great diversity with a huge fast-growing urban district of more than 230,000 students (Clark County) situated adjacent to rural districts, many of which are experiencing static or declining enrollment spread throughout districts the size of many states.

Conventional wisdom would suggest that such diversity would produce two worlds apart with little or no need to collaborate. But, Nevada stands as a land of surprises with noteworthy examples of emerging rural/urban school district collaboration. Three examples exemplify this emerging collaboration.

Facility Inequities

Nevada school districts have a strong statutory foundation of local control. Consistent with this charge, the Nevada Legislature obligates and authorizes its school districts to assume responsibility for funding capital development and, in the past, has provided no capital development funding. Unfortunately, the static or declining enrollment and flat economic conditions in many rural districts have produced an inequitable school facility condition. For exam-

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ple, an urban fast-growing district routinely opened a new school every 38 days, while the adjacent rural district was faced with evacuating its century-old schools during windy days. The inequity of this condition first was realized by districts and then by the legislature which began infusing state funds into rural districts with no capacity to fund capital development on their own. Admittedly, the diversion of funds was not large, but the benefit derived by this collaboration created the political foundation that enabled increased funding for other collaborative efforts between urban and rural districts.

Teacher Training

Playing off of the collaboration between rural and urban districts in the facility development program, the state funded a Regional Professional Development Program to improve teacher preparation. The program consists of borderless entities designed to deliver services to the state's geographic regions. While the legislature designated the largest district in each geographic area as the fiscal agent, it purposefully created a governance structure requiring rural and urban districts to collaborate in planning and sharing the resources provided. The resulting dialogue among district leaders has proved to support the belief that staff development needs are borderless and collaboration is possible, practical and politically wise.

Technology Use

Finally, the legislature capitalized on a joint facility-use plan piloted by the largest urban district and the Community College of Southern Nevada (CCSN) to promote both intergovernmental capital development and technology use in schools. The plan called for the district and the CCSN to jointly develop and share a high-tech classroom and computer laboratory facility on comprehensive high school campuses. The legislature funded this program in several locations throughout southern Nevada. The concept has become a prototype for expanding both CCSN programs, vitally important for the economic development of rural communities, as well as desperately needed technology to rural high schools. Development of the prototype led to the funding of similar high-technology centers throughout rural Nevada and promises to produce collaboration between rural and urban school districts and postsecondary education.

Governor Kenny C. Guinn, ECS chairman-elect and past superintendent of schools in the Clark County School District, has indicated his commitment to continue this collaboration between urban and rural school districts.

McCord is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and is the director of the university's Center for Education Policy Studies. He previously served as deputy assistant superintendent for government relations and educational accountability with the Clark County School District.

For more information:

- Nevada Legislature – www.leg.nv.state.us
- Nevada Education Reform Act – www.leg.nv.us/leb/fiscal/LeBeapeAnnualRpt001.htm
- Community College of Southern Nevada – www.ccsn.nevada.edu

MAINE SCHOOL EMBRACES SERVICE-LEARNING

Editor's note: Although rural communities may provide fewer opportunities for their students than larger areas, many are finding creative ways to expand learning outside the classroom. Here is one teacher's account of how her very small school got students involved in their rural community, and a local employer involved with the students.

by Trisha L. Smith

The Airline Community School, a K-8 school located in Aurora, Maine, has fewer than 50 students. Much of the community is supported directly or indirectly by the natural resources of the area, mainly the lumber and blueberry industries. When looking at community resources that could be used for service-learning, it seemed fitting to focus on the environment.

Our involvement with service-learning began in fall 1999 when we asked students to think of a project that focused on the question, "How does increased population and development in our rural communities affect the ecological systems we presently enjoy?" The project's focus was to be on a concern or need in the community.

Throughout the fall, students were involved with various mini-service learning projects. For instance, with the cooperation of a local construction company, they helped to construct an erosion control ditch along a new road. Students also helped spread nutrient-rich brush at a wetland mitigation site and observed mechanisms to protect the water quality and habitats along the banks of the river.

Student-Generated Projects

The element missing from these projects, however, was student initiation. A 5th grader, after reading articles about how individuals had made a difference protecting parts of the environment, proposed that students write letters to Champion International Paper Company requesting a piece of land in our area that could be set aside as a "historical landmark in nature." Several phone conversations and discussions later, we also began discussing the possibility of a forestry education element. It seemed like an important balance for students studying Maine's ecological issues, as well as major roles in Maine's economy.

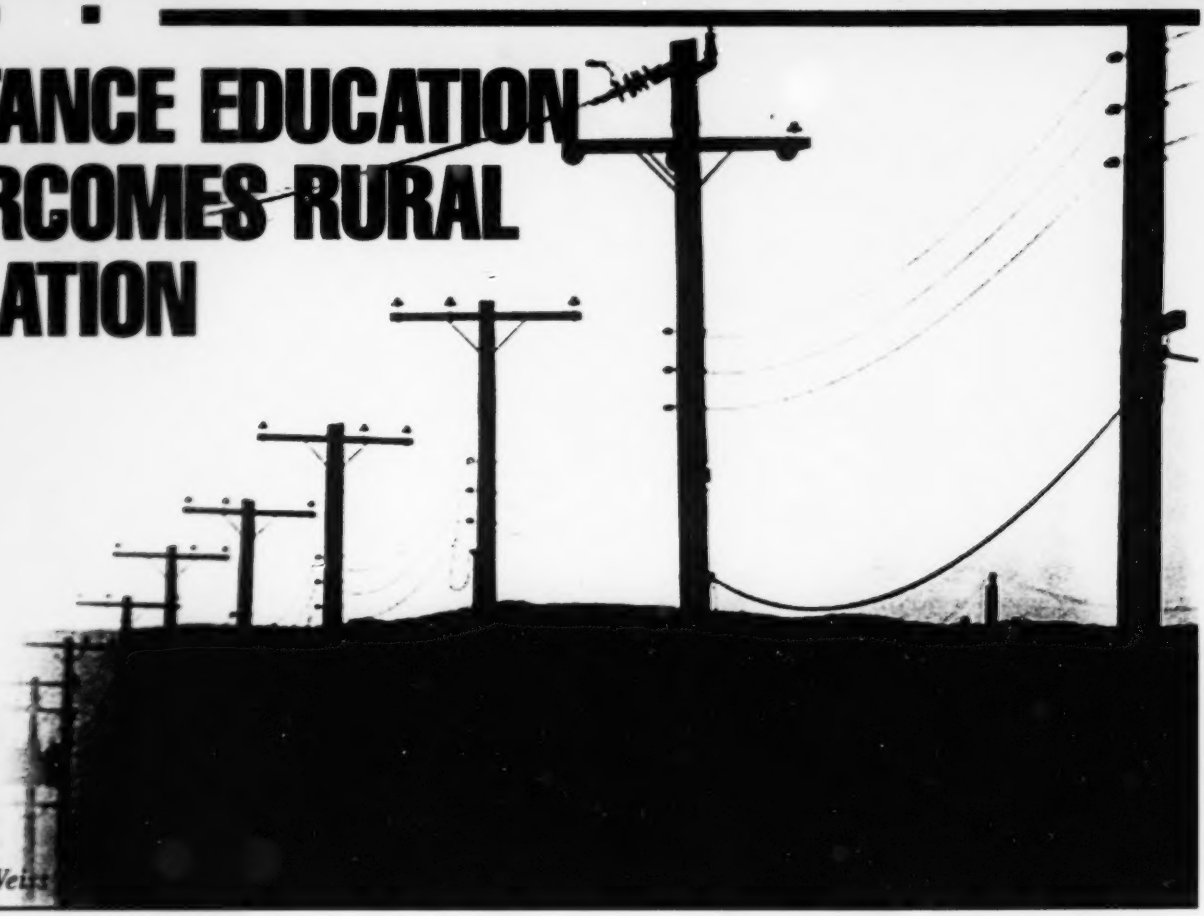
Students and company officials discussed site conditions, location, legal issues, limitations, opportunities for broader learning, lease, donation or purchase options, involvement of company experts and various other issues involved in land-use agreements. In the spring, paper company representatives proposed a potential site. It contained a clear-cut, selectively harvested forest and an old-growth forest over a 10-acre span located only a few miles from the school. The location and diversity of this land provide a variety of habitats, a good representation of forest succession, access to two ponds, an active beaver dam, an observable wood duck box and a small stream. The land had all of the qualities addressed in the students' proposal and then some.

Student Success

A forester for the paper company took 5th-8th graders on a guided tour of the site, explaining possible uses for the land while teaching them about the nature around them. On October 27, 2000, the superintendent of schools signed a three-year lease, at no cost, allowing students to use the land as an outdoor classroom. Local television stations covered the reception ceremony, ribbon cutting and signing of the lease agreement, recognizing the students as individuals who can make a difference.

Smith teaches 5th and 6th grade at the Airline Community School in Aurora, Maine.■

DISTANCE EDUCATION OVERCOMES RURAL ISOLATION



by Suzanne Weiss

"A national survey of more than 7,000 kindergarten teachers... found that 35% of the nation's children are not ready for school."

Blending old-fashioned cooperation with cutting-edge technology, four rural school districts along a 25-mile stretch of Interstate 70 east of Denver created Colorado's first distance-learning network a decade ago.

Opportunistically tapping into the fiber-optic cable system being developed on the eastern plains by independent phone companies, the four towns linked their high school classrooms together in an effort to share resources and expand student choices.

The idea was that it made less sense for each of the districts to hire a separate French teacher than to have the French teacher in one place simultaneously instructing classes at all four schools. This was accomplished through the use of "studio" classrooms equipped with a half-dozen video monitors that allowed a teacher full view of all four classrooms at once.

As a result, 11th and 12th graders in the four districts returned to school in fall 1992 to find a new menu of courses — calculus, French and German, communications and vocational agriculture — that previously would have been available to only a few of them.

Closing the Gap with Technology

Today, a growing number of rural schools are hooked up in such fashion, not only to one another within a given county, but also to classrooms in other parts of the state and even to colleges and universities. Advances in technology and telecommunications — from interactive television to the Internet — have greatly expanded rural schools' ability to overcome the disadvantages of geographic isolation and limited resources.

Distance education, as it is called, is instructional delivery that does not require the student to be physically present in the same location as the instructor. It can be either synchronous — involving the "real time," simultaneous participation of students and instructors, using interactive TV, teleconferences and the like — or asynchronous, which does not require simultaneous participation. Instead, students may choose their own instructional timeframe, working on what they want to work on, when they want to work on it. Asynchronous delivery modes include email, listservs, audio- and videotaped courses, and Internet-based instruction.

Distance education has been around for more than a century, dating back to the correspondence courses that allowed students in remote sections of the country to earn college degrees by mail. Today, it is used in all areas of education, including K-12 and postsecondary, home schooling, continuing education, corporate training, military and government training and telemedicine.

In higher education, university and college instructors frequently lecture not only to the students right in front of them but also to students at another campus, at a satellite facility or, because of space limitations, in the overflow classroom next door. And more and more institutions are providing students with the opportunity to earn undergraduate and advanced degrees without ever setting foot in a classroom, via satellite, audio and over the Internet.

Teacher Preparation

At the K-12 level, the principal applications of distance education are resource sharing, student enrichment and teacher professional development, particularly crucial for schools in remote, rural areas.

As an example, schools on the Havasupai Indian Reservation near the Grand Canyon in Arizona are isolated on all sides by high canyon walls that make even radio communications impossible. Cable, fiber and Internet access, common in more populated areas, are luxuries on this remote reservation.

Recently, the Havasupai faced a cutoff in Head Start services, triggered by a new federal requirement that Head Start teachers obtain an associate degree in early child development or be disqualified from the program. The Havasupai turned for help to Northern Arizona University, an institution experienced in using the Internet and video-conferencing to broadcast classes to isolated communities.

Working together, tribal officials and the university obtained a federal grant to buy and install satellite dishes to beam early childhood education classes to several locations on the reservation, therefore, preserving the Havasupai's Head Start program.

Broadening Horizons

Thousands of miles away, in rural West Virginia, advances in technology and telecommunications are expanding academic opportunities and broadening horizons for high school students in remote, sparsely populated Wetzel County, where until recently, their main information resource was the school library.

Several years ago, district officials decided to tackle the "digital divide" head on. The district installed a T-1 connection and joined NETSchools, a program that gives every student and teacher a laptop computer connected to a local-area network through infrared ports installed in each room.

The high school, in effect, was transformed into a large computer lab, with students able to connect in hallways, the cafeteria and the library, as well as in classrooms.

Within six months, 80% of the school's 144 students were accessing the Internet daily — from special education students to students in the agriculture program — and within a year, students' scores on the Stanford Achievement Test were higher in every subject than the previous year.

Research on distance education in K-12 schools, as well as in adult learning and training settings, strongly suggests that it is an effective means for delivering instruction. Provided teachers are well-versed in technology, distance-learning programs can facilitate interactions between teachers and students outside of time and space constraints, improve student interaction with the course material and one another.

.Weiss is ECS managing editor.■

COMMUNITY COLLEGES KEY TO RURAL SUCCESS

by J. Parker Chesson Jr.

The development of the new economy has been accompanied by vast and rapid changes in most facets of our lives. As former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich states in his most recent book, *The Future of Success*, "there is no turning back to the old jobs and the old securities, to the old families and the old communities." The nature of work and requisite job skills are changing everywhere, and rural areas are no exception. More than ever, rural prosperity depends on increasing rural citizens' access to educational opportunities.

Community colleges increasingly are being viewed by national and state leaders as critical to continued economic development and to providing more opportunities for access to education. This role is even more important in rural America where the college is often the best resource, and sometimes the only resource, with the capacity to help build a better economy and educate people for a better life.

That recognition underpins the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI), a national demonstration program managed by MDC, Inc. and funded by the Ford Foundation. Since 1994, 24 community and tribal colleges, serving distressed rural regions in 12 states have been part of this effort to build rural community colleges' capacity to improve their communities. RCCI has two broad goals: promoting economic development and increasing access to education. Each participating college, working in partnership with community organizations and agencies, has developed its own set of strategies for addressing these goals.

Expanded View of Access

For RCCI, the term "access" encompasses both access to the college and access through the college to expanded opportunities — including further education and productive, rewarding work. RCCI colleges are seeking ways to increase service to the following:

- Middle and high school students needing stronger academic and counseling programs to help them along the pathway to college
- First-generation college goers
- Unemployed, marginally employed and discouraged workers
- Adults in the workforce who need skills retraining
- People who find it difficult to come to the college campus because of distance or other factors that make them uncomfortable in a traditional college setting.

At one RCCI college, this new way of thinking about access has led to an institution-wide emphasis on teaching to diverse learning styles. All entering students are tested, and their learning-style profile is shared with their instructors; all faculty are trained in new ways of teaching. Another college has spearheaded a communitywide education initiative to improve math and critical-thinking skills among people of all ages, from preschool through working adults. Still another site established a mentoring and enrichment program for middle school students that culminates in a full college scholarship when they graduate from high school.

Strategies that expand educational access for people in isolated and economically distressed rural areas benefit individuals and the community at large. For individuals, community colleges can expand horizons and opens new doors to careers. For the community, increased educational access helps build the foundation for economic prosperity and enhanced quality of life.

Chesson is senior consultant for MDC.

See www.mdcinc.org/rcci for detailed information on the Rural Community College Initiative.■

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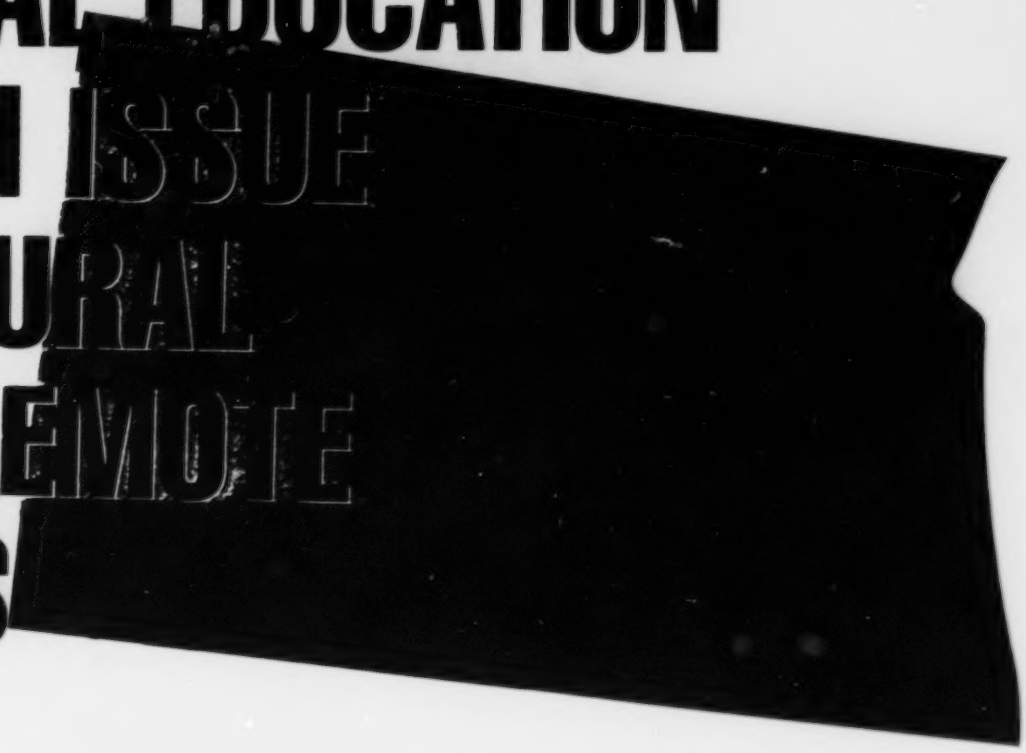
SPECIAL EDUCATION TOUGH ISSUE FOR RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS



by Lynne Chalmers

The need for special education teachers in rural and remote areas of the state was one of the factors that prompted the University of North Dakota to change its teacher preparation program in the areas of learning disabilities, emotionally disturbed and mental retardation.

Only two cities in North Dakota have populations over 50,000. Because most schools are very small and far apart, special education teachers in each of these disability areas must serve multiple schools. As a result, much of their teaching day is lost in traveling from site to site, and consultation, collaboration, planning and creative teaching opportunities are lost when the special education teacher is not available after or before school.

Certain areas of North Dakota, primarily rural/remote areas and American Indian reservations, face chronic difficulties in recruiting and retaining special education staff. There simply are not enough qualified applicants at a time when the move toward educating students in the least-restrictive environment has increased the need for special educators, especially those skilled at working with students with various disabilities within several general education classrooms.

Least-Restrictive Requirements

The need to serve students with disabilities in less-restrictive environments, predominantly general education classrooms, was a second factor precipitating change in how the university prepares its special education teachers. In June 1994, the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) charged the state education agency with noncompliance with the least-restrictive environment requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The categorical teacher training and credentialing system in North Dakota was implicated as being among the obstacles.

North Dakota's response to the report included an extensive three-year planning, training and implementation plan for each of the state's special education regions. The University of North Dakota fell within the first targeted region.

The teacher preparation program in special education began to prepare preservice teachers as "educational strategists" first, and then to provide them with expertise in specific disability areas. The university undertook the responsibility to: (1) increase the number and quality of special education teachers available to chil-

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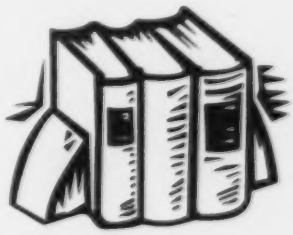

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dren with learning disabilities, emotional disturbance and mental retardation, and (2) provide the means for providing services to students with disabilities in inclusive and less-categorical settings.

Program Description

The educational strategist (ES) is a three-tiered program. In the first tier, students are prepared in general education (i.e., elementary education, middle level education, secondary education). In North Dakota, teaching credentials in special education can only be attached to a general education teaching license, thus students complete an undergraduate bachelor's degree in general education and then pursue credentials in special education at the graduate level.

The second tier is the ES program. This is a cross-categorical preparation that includes competencies that are generic across special-needs populations in the areas of learning disabilities, emotionally disturbed and mental retardation.

The third tier is specific training "tracks" in these disability areas. A student must choose at least one track, but may select two or even all three tracks. Each track offers advanced coursework in assessment and methods, with a capstone internship experience.

Upon completion of the ES program, a typical student would be licensed as an elementary, middle level or secondary education teacher with credentials in ES and one or more of the three disabilities noted above. While any combination of general education license and disability specific credentials are possible, all combinations include the ES credential. This program prepares teachers to work with special education students in general education classrooms, including one-on-one/small-group teaching, co-teaching, collaboration, consultation and other kinds of support to the classroom teacher and students with disabilities. The disability specific "tracks" prepare teachers to work with these students in more restrictive settings such as a resource room or self-contained setting.

Rural Benefits

For a small school in a rural area, a teacher with credentials in ES and learning disabilities would be able to case manage and provide extensive "pull-out" services for students with learning disabilities, in addition to direct service and consultation for emotionally disturbed and mentally retarded students in the general education classroom. As an "educational strategist," a teacher may provide occasional "pull-out" service with emotionally disturbed or mentally retarded students. The benefit for the small school is having one special education teacher who can serve a caseload of students with various disabilities, instead of hiring three separate teachers or contracting with other schools to share teachers.

Results

Since the implementation of the ES four years ago, 54 credentials have been awarded. More than 50% of these teachers have remained in North Dakota, many of them in rural and remote areas.

The program appears to be a start in fulfilling the need for cross-categorically prepared teachers in small, rural schools, as evidenced by the many phone calls the special education program area receives from special education directors and school superintendents asking if there are any of "those ES teachers" available for employment. A second piece of encouraging evidence is the many inservice teachers, credentialed in only one area of disability, who are taking coursework, either on-campus or over the interactive video network, to complete the ES credential.

The best feedback for the new ES program and credential was the OSEP monitoring visit in fall 1999. The state received no citations in regards to the least-restrictive environment requirements and only positive comments about the services being provided to students with disabilities in rural and remote areas.

Chalmers is a professor with the University of North Dakota.■

EARLY LEARNING:

CHILD CARE IN RURAL AMERICA

The first National Education Goal states "all children in America will start school ready to learn." It is well-acknowledged that the quality of children's early experiences largely determines their readiness for school. But in a national survey of more than 7,000 kindergarten teachers, the Carnegie Foundation, ound that 35% of the nation's children are not ready for school. A large percentage (43%) also reported readiness of children has worsened during the last five years.

In addition, there is a substantial body of research suggesting that quality child care can be beneficial to children's cognitive development. The advantages of good child care for disadvantaged children particularly is well-documented.

Yet, little research has been done on rural children, although nearly 25% of children in the United States live in nonmetropolitan communities. Research examining rural children's child care conditions has received even less attention, despite the fact that labor force participation rates of rural women are nearly identical to those of urban women, according to the Bureau of the Census.

In an effort to better understand the nature of rural child care, researchers from the University of Missouri conducted a needs assessment of child care conditions and characteristics in 12 rural Missouri communities. The authors surveyed rural child care providers, mothers of children in child care, kindergarten teachers and employers. The data showed these four groups to be "very satisfied" with the current child care conditions in their communities. But, in these same communities, kindergarten teachers reported that children increasingly were less ready for school. In addition, a 1994 study found rural child care programs to be of lower quality than urban programs.

Improving Rural Child Care

These findings led to the development of Project REACH, a specialized program to investigate the quality of rural early care and education and to train and support child care providers. From this project, much has been learned about the conditions and characteristics of child care in rural communities.

The quality of rural child care centers and homes prior to participation in Project REACH was substantially lower than urban samples. The findings suggest that prior to a systematic training program for caregivers, the average quality of child care available in rural communities is barely minimal. While children's basic health and safety needs may be met, little interpersonal warmth and few learning experiences are evident.

In addition, observations indicated that prior to training, caregivers in rural communities commonly use developmentally inappropriate practices. Parents and community members also expressed traditional opinions of what child care practices should look like and believed children should be ready for school rather than school being ready for children.

No Tie with Preschool

In all the Project REACH communities, child care was viewed as involving custodial care, and preschool was seen as involving more learning experiences. In fact, in several rural communities children attend child care full-time, but parents pull their children out of child care to attend "preschool programs." Although unintentional, this practice communicates the negative message to the child care provider and the community that child care is not a place where children learn and that it is not worth investing in.

Continued on next page

> "Parents and community members... believed children should be ready for school rather than school being ready for children."

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In another community, parents send their children to full-time child care yet pay an extra fee to a "preschool teacher" who comes to the child care program and holds a one- to two-hour preschool class. Again, the primary message sent is that child care providers are not as capable of providing educational programs for children and children are only learning during the "preschool" time rather than throughout the day.

Rural Challenge

The goal of creating high-quality, interdependent systems of early care and education poses a challenge for rural America. Before a system can be strengthened and improved, it first must be acknowledged as needing to improve. Specific challenges include:

- Convincing parents they need to be educated about features of quality care
- Encouraging employers to offer more family-friendly work policies
- Facilitating child care providers' professional development and support, especially when they don't perceive a problem with the status quo.

Research confirms that the quality of early care has significant and long-term consequences on children's development and academic success and that parents who receive support and benefits are better able to manage work and family demands. Questions remain, however, concerning the dynamic interactions among these variables in rural communities.

Excerpted from "Perceptions of Child Care in Rural America," by Kathy R. Thornburg, Michelle C. Mathews, Linda Espinosa and Jean Ispa, Journal of Research in Rural Education, *Fall 1997, Vol. 13, No. 2, and "Project REACH: Training Rural Child Care Providers," by the same authors,* Young Children, *May 2000.*

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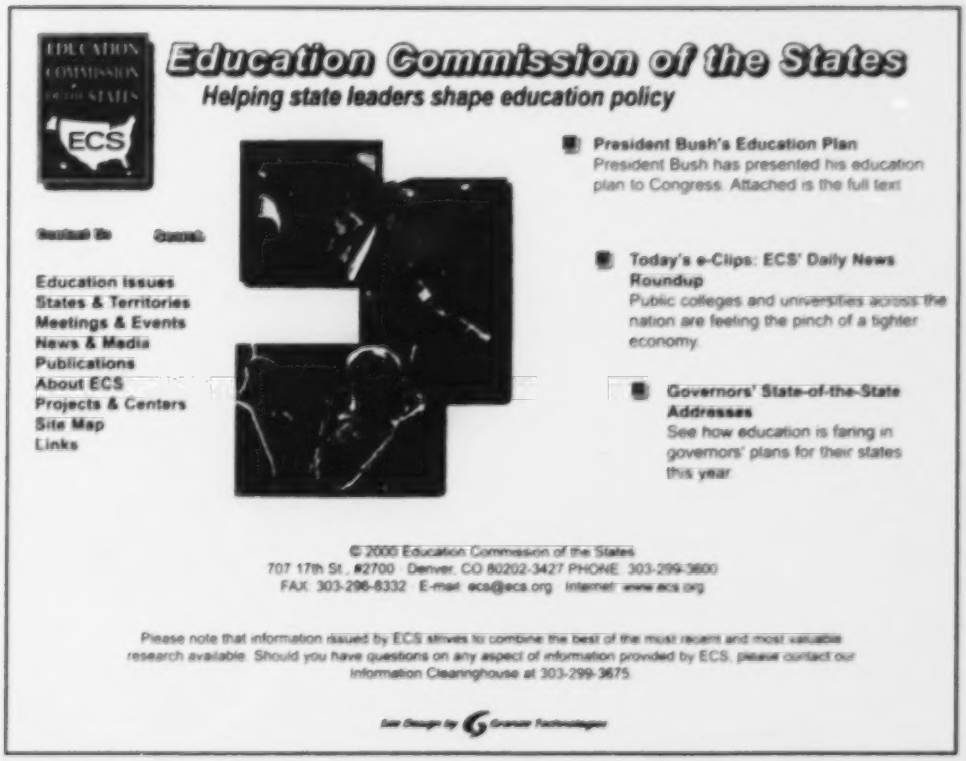
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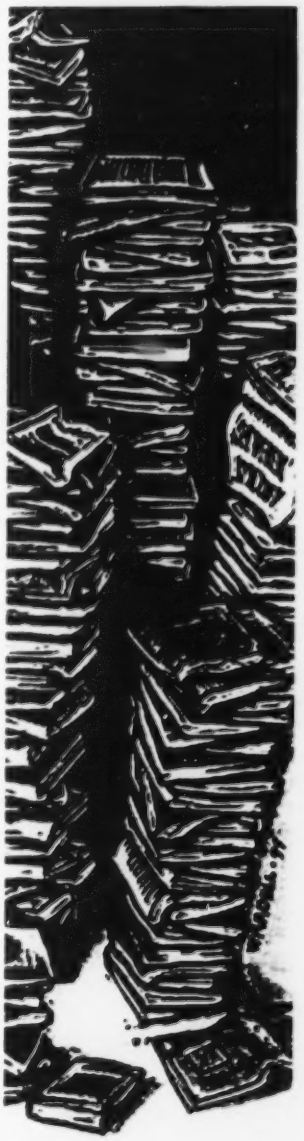


- The **Rural Schools and Community Trust** — A "virtual" organization with a small national office in Washington and a large field staff working in various locations across the country. The organization's work, supported in part by the Annenberg Foundation, focuses on strengthening relationships between rural schools and communities and engaging students in community-based public work. Its Web site provides access to a wide variety of resources, links and publications.
  www.ruraledu.org

- **ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools** — One of 16 clearinghouses that make up the federally supported Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), this Web site provides a searchable bibliographic database of hundreds of articles and reports about rural education, small schools, migrant education and tribal schools as well as the Rural Education Directory.
  http://www.ael.org/eric/

- **Navigating Resources for Rural Schools** — This Web site, maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics, offers up-to-date data, studies and tabulations on rural education, as well as links to various agencies and services that provide assistance to rural schools and districts.
  www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/

- **Distance Learning Resource Network (DLRN)** — DLRN is the dissemination project for the Star Schools Program, a federally funded distance-education program that helps small or isolated schools in rural areas use new technologies to offer courses to students, and professional development to teachers, that they could not otherwise provide. This Web site includes general information about distance education; instructional modules, enrichment activities and courses; summaries of current research; and online course-design tools.
  http://www.dlrn.org

- **National Rural Education Association (NREA)** — Founded in 1907, NREA is an organization of rural school administrators, teachers, school board members, regional service agency personnel, researchers, business leaders and others interested in maintaining the vitality of rural school systems. The NREA Web site features various resources, links, news and information about upcoming state and national events and activities, as well as the organization's online journal, *The Rural Educator.*
  http://www.colostate.edu/orgs/NREA

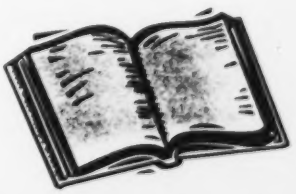
- **Organizations Concerned About Rural Education (OCRE)** — OCRE is a coalition of two dozen national and regional organizations dedicated to the improvement of public education and economic development in rural America. Its Web site provides a variety of information, including news summaries, publications, links to other Web sites and an online toolkit to help build and sustain support for public education.
  http://www.ruralschools.org

Readings

- ***Why Rural Matters: The Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education,*** a report published in August 2000 by the Rural Schools and Community Trust, provides a detailed, state-by-state analysis of rural education in the U.S. and argues that there is an increasingly urgent need for states to develop explicit policies on rural education.
  http://www.ruraledu.org/streport.html

- **"Attracting and Retaining Teachers in Rural Areas,"** an article written by Timothy Collins in December 1999 for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, reviews the challenges rural districts face in recruiting and retaining teachers, and explores several promising strategies that have emerged over the past several years at the state and local levels.
  http://www.ael.org/eric/digests/edorc997.htm

- ***Improving Rural School Facilities: Design, Construction, Finance and Public Support,*** edited by Sarah Dewees and Patricia Cahape Hammer, provides a wide-ranging look at the challenges involved in constructing, renovating and expanding school facilities in rural communities. It explores strategies for generating public support, incorporating technology and designing school buildings that are useful to communities in a variety of capacities.
  http://www.ael.org/rel/rural/rsfabstr.htm



RURAL STATISTICS

- **The percent of rural students eligible for free lunch in 1997-98** ranged from a low of 5.9% in Connecticut to a high of 60.8% in Mississippi, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (Data were not available for Arizona, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Pennsylvania or Washington.)

Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, Common Core of Data, Public School Universe, 1997-98.

- **One quarter of America's school-age children attend public schools in rural areas or small towns,** according to the Rural School and Community Trust.
- **Rural America is as diverse as urban America,** especially among the young. Minorities constituted 17% of all rural residents in 1997. More than one-third of the rural population of four minority groups was under age 18 in 1997, compared with one-fourth of the rural white population.
- **Rural America is poorer than metropolitan areas** as a whole and nearly as poor as central cities. Poverty is especially prevalent among rural minorities; for instance, a rural African American has a greater chance of living in poverty than an inner-city black.

Source: Why Rural Matters: The Need for Every State To Take Action on Rural Education *(2000, August).* www.ruraledu.org.

- **Poverty and the working poor in rural areas.** The overall poverty rate in rural America declined slightly since 1993, according to the 1999 report, *Sociodemographic Changes: Promises and Problems for Rural Education.* In 1995, the rural household poverty rate was 15.6%, compared to the urban rate of 13.4%, a gap that has remained constant since 1991. Moreover, a large portion of rural residents (26.3%) lived just above the poverty line, compared with the urban rate of 18.2%.
- **Rural blacks and Native Americans suffer from more prevalent poverty** — 34.8% and 35.6%, respectively, compared with 12.2% among rural non-Hispanic whites. Yet, because of the large white majority in rural areas, almost two-thirds of the rural poor were non-Hispanic whites. The poverty rate for rural children in 1995 was 22.4%, equivalent to 3.2 million children living in families below the poverty line. Among people living in rural female-headed families, the poverty rate was 39.3% in 1995. More than 60% of the rural poor were in families with one or more working members.

Source: Huang, Gary G. ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. http://www.ael.org/eric/digests/edorc987.htm.

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